

## Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-78

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were among the nation's most political. Nor does he clarify the nature and extent of opposition to the Northwest Farm Managers Association, beyond very scant reference to the clue that many managers worked for large corporations based in the northeast. Indeed, Drache is curiously unhelpful in explaining the special needs and circumstances of professional farm managers in relation to their employers, tenants, other farmers, and agribusiness.

*Plowshares to Printouts* will provide some useful information for agricultural historians of the Midwest, but they will need to bring to it additional research and thought if this interesting part of the past is to have meaning. Perhaps the most challenging beginning Drache provides is his controversial assertion that "Weather, economic conditions, 'corporation farming,' and adversities, imagined or real, are often given as reasons for [farm] failure, but in almost all cases they are secondary causes to poor management" (x).

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*Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-78*, by Annette Atkins. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984. 147 pp. Notes, illustrations, index. \$12.95 cloth.

Farming, as every Iowan knows, is risky business. The workings of the American and international economic systems supply most of the dangers. Weather contributes a substantial number, however, and at times, insects add greatly to the farmer's woes. Annette Atkins, an assistant professor of history at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, looks at one of those times and uses the episode as a case study of nineteenth-century responses to social crises. For American historians, particularly agricultural historians, her work has even larger meaning.

Written in a clear and lively manner, the book is impressively researched. Atkins has drawn upon private and public papers, government documents, newspapers, county histories, and novels. She has made use also of the writings of other scholars, especially Gilbert C. Fite, Daniel T. Rodgers, and Kai T. Erickson. Perhaps most important, the sources she tapped gave her access to the minds of farm people as well as government officials and politicians.

In some ways, this is only a small monograph. The text runs to but 127 pages. It focuses on less than a decade and on only one state. Grasshoppers plagued much of the Midwest in the 1870s, but Atkins limits her attention to one state, justifying the limitation with the argument that Minnesota was representative of the region and that concen-

tration on one state permitted her to explore the story in depth. The argument is persuasive.

The book's organization is predominantly topical. After a good preface, Atkins discusses the "core" values of late nineteenth-century America; turns next to the enormous grasshopper damage from 1873 to 1877, and then deals with farmer reactions, showing how agrarianism and the work ethic influenced them. (The farmers saw themselves as virtuous but unfortunate and thus worthy of help.) The book moves next to the counties' efforts to supply relief and then to state efforts, both inspired by a desire to hold good people on the land. Governor Pillsbury's move away from state relief in 1876 provides the next topic. Like many Americans of the period, Pillsbury feared that relief would corrupt its recipients, had a negative view of the poor regardless of the cause of their poverty, and favored private charity and self-help. Following this exploration of the state's mixed record, Atkins examines the federal government's small relief efforts.

Described in this fashion, the book must appear no more than interesting. Yet it is much more than that. It is surely not an insignificant or unimaginative monograph. Most obviously, it is a case study in the history of public relief efforts. With a clear perception of the ways in which the historical process works, Atkins shows that the severity of the grasshopper plagues forced Minnesotans to discard reliance on individuals and local communities and turn to state and federal governments for help, but that these moves were reluctant, resisted, and confined. Some people even insisted that farmers were not helping themselves and did not deserve help from others, including their governments.

This seemingly small episode is also a study of the decline in the farmer's status. In the development of this major point, the chapter on core values has great importance. Atkins maintains that four sets of values—agrarianism, the work ethic, modernization, and money—were especially important in the episode.

The poverty and need occasioned by the plagues brought two central values of American culture into direct conflict—the nobility of farmers and the work ethic. Farmers needed help, relief and charity. Were they not noble? Did poverty result from forces other than the moral failings of the poor? Both values could not be honored when they clashed so directly. Either the special status of the farmers or the money ethic (in the guise of the work ethic) had to yield (124).

Exerting major influence, the work ethic placed narrow limits on the

relief supplied to suffering farmers. "The response," Atkins suggests, "serves as a barometer of the declining value of farmers in American society and the increasing value of money. Success would come to be measured more by wealth than by nobility of occupation" (126).

The words are poignant now, in a period that future historians may label the final crisis of the family farm. They indicate that Atkin's work has even larger meaning than suggested thus far. She has taken on one of the truly big tasks of American historians: to explain why farm people have become such a small part of the total American population. The task is important because American agrarians from Thomas Jefferson to Henry A. Wallace and beyond have insisted that the nation must have a large farm population, for social and political reasons even more than for economic ones. "How," Atkins asks at the outset of her book, "can farm people stay on the land and face those threats year after year?" (1) As the question implies, the pressures working against the agrarian vision of what America should be have been great. During the past half century, most American farm people surrendered to them, and now the small number that remains on the land faces overwhelming new threats to its existence as farmers. Yet in the late nineteenth century and on into the first decade and a half of the twentieth, the farm population grew rapidly in spite of grasshoppers, high railroad rates, and low commodity prices. The pests slowed the growth of some Minnesota counties and pushed others into decline, but the desire to farm and the determination to hold people on the land still had strength, and the population declines were only temporary in the 1870s. The grasshopper plagues ended as quickly and mysteriously as they had come, and now our modernized agricultural system deals effectively with insects. Even a century ago, grasshoppers did not affect the farm population nearly as much as technological revolution, cost-price squeezes, and urban opportunities have in our day.

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*The Vanishing Farmland Crisis: Critical Views of the Movement to Preserve Agricultural Land*, edited by John Baden. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984. ix, 169 pp. Notes, index. \$19.95 cloth.

During recent years a good deal of discussion has centered on the rapid loss of farmland in the United States. These losses, so the reports go, have resulted from paving over millions of acres and from destructive erosion. The losses have been both quantitative and qualitative. Some of the publicity has been rather frightening. If certain writers are accu-

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